

John Ashbery's "A Wave": Privileging the Symbol

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... [long poems] are in a way diaries or logbooks of a continuing experience that continues to provide new reflections and therefore [a long poem] gets to be much closer to a whole reality than the shorter ones do.

John Ashbery
Interview, *New York Quarterly*

That Ashbery believes long poems are "much closer to a whole reality" than shorter poems is telling. Despite their sometimes inhibiting length and poetics, his own long poems written since 1975 are considerably closer not only to "a whole reality" but to conventional poetic technique, one which few critics acknowledge. One of his most brilliant critics is Marjorie Perloff, who without making a distinction between long and short poems, maintains that Ashbery's poetry is distinguished by an enigmatic style which privileges indeterminacy rather than the traditional symbolist style practiced by most modernist and postmodernist poets. I would like here to refine Perloff's thesis by suggesting that, while Ashbery makes much use of this enigmatic style in his long poems, passages characterized by such a style are blended into and subordinated to a dominant symbolist technique, rendering his later long poems surprisingly conventional

and more easily interpretable. A good example is his most recent long poem, "A Wave" (1984).¹

Taken from the book by the same title, "A Wave" is characterized by the poet's desire to represent experience as ongoing impression, "the tender blur of the setting" (69). Where most poets write as if meaning can be gathered from distinctly unique or intense episodes, Ashbery—particularly in his more recent long poems—insists that only a sense of meaning can be felt, and this only for short periods.

And the issue of making sense becomes such a far-off one.
Isn't this "sense"—
This little dog of my life that I can see—that answers me
Like a dog, and wags its tails, though excitement and
fidelity are
About all that ever gets expressed? (70)

While his subject here may be the indeterminacy of consciousness, his writing is conventionally referential. By "sense" of meaning he intends the emotional world we inhabit. Since the publication of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975), Ashbery's long poems render this interior world so accurately by transmitting such a multitude of deceptively casual musings, like the one above, that the ideas give way to effect: we retain the impression of a human being continually engaging elementary questions about life more than we retain any of the specific questions or answers. Meaning is not forgotten, but, because Ashbery seems always to doubt but never entirely reject the *possibility* of meaning, we are left with a notion of his continuing uncertainty.

But this is not to say his long poems are afloat, unfixed in a universe of non sequiturs. Most of Ashbery's recent long poems are accessible, though their style can seem at first prohibitively resistant to understanding. Eventually, competent readers can find that the truly enigmatic passages are blended with those of reasonably straightforward language to produce an impression

¹"A Wave" is approximately 700 lines in length, stretched over 29 irregular stanzas. Because Ashbery's long poem "As We Know" is actually two poems in one, designed to be read simultaneously, it is to some extent different from "A Wave" or "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror," and for that reason it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, most of this discussion could be applied to "As We Know."

of the conscious mind in alternating periods of perplexity and clarity. And throughout the poem, Ashbery nearly announces his technique as well as his point of view. He is not evasive; he is referential—that is to say, he employs symbolist tools.

Perloff sees symbolist writing as that kind described by Eliot in his call for an objective correlative. In Eliot's words, the "only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding 'an objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion . . ." (145). Perloff also turns to Auden's claim that a poet may describe the "sacred encounters of his imagination" in terms of something other than the components of that encounter (58). Surely Perloff is correct in her translation of Eliot's and Auden's poetics, contending that the two High Modernists were committed to a style of writing which renders even the "ineffable" through "concretion of the symbol" (27). Her notion of symbolist writing is nothing new: words signifying discernible referents outside the poem. But focusing on the poet's early verse, Perloff asserts that an Ashbery poem, regardless of length, cuts off "the referential dimension" (266) and that his images usually "have no discernible referents" (267).

For the sake of discussion, then, let us think of the term "symbolist" as nearly synonymous with "referential." Symbolist poetry usually achieves meaning by means of a system of imagery which renders an idea or attitude. In this sense, most poems are symbolist. Those that are not are poems which intentionally sabotage their own grammar in order to call into question conventional poetic processes for communicating. Rimbaud, Stein, Olsen, and even Pound, in certain cantos, practiced variations of such an antisymbolist poetics. Today, while language poets are most actively antisymbolist, their poems are rarely long. (Michael Palmer's "Notes for Echo Lake" [1981] is an exception).

Ashbery's shorter poems are most often antisymbolist in technique, though both long and short have often been incorrectly accused of unnecessary obfuscation, much in the way Gertrude Stein's work was attacked. As Perloff points out, both Stein and Ashbery rise out of the same reformatory strain of literature, one which is not primarily symbolist as is most modernist writing. The works of this genre often "seem to have no external

referent" (9). The poem is intentionally unclear, "and yet one does keep listening. For the special pleasure of reading a poem like 'These Lacustrine Cities' [*Rivers and Mountains* 9] is that disclosure of some special meaning seems perpetually imminent. . . . As readers, we are thus left in a state of expectancy: just at the point where revelation might occur, the curtain suddenly comes down" (11).

"These Lacustrine Cities" is much like the more recent "Purists Will Object," published in *A Wave*. The poem's images hint at a logic which continues to evaporate, almost with each subsequent line:

We have the looks you want:
 The gonzo (musculature seemingly wired to the stars)
 Colors like lead, khaki and pomegranate; things you
 Put in your hair, with the whole panoply of the past:
 Landscape embroidery, complete sets of this and that.
 It's bankruptcy, the human haul,
 The shining, bulging nets lifted out of the sea, and
 always a few refugees
 Dropping back into the no-longer-mirthful kingdom
 On the day someone else sells an old house
 And someone else begins to add on to his: all
 In the interests of this pornographic masterpiece,
 Variegated, polluted skyscraper to which all gazes are
 drawn,
 Pleasure we cannot and will not escape.

It seems we were going home.
 The smell of blossoming privet
 blanketed the narrow avenue.
 The traffic lights were green and aqueous.
 So this is the subterranean life.
 If it can't be conjugated onto us, what good is it?
 What need for purists when the demotic is built to last,
 To outlast us, and no dialect hears us?²² (17).

The poem intimates a world of disturbingly radical, almost perverse style, one which privileges the "gonzo," the "porno-

²²"Purists Will Object" *A WAVE* by John Ashbery. Copyright © 1983 by John Ashbery. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc.

graphic," the "demotic." But beyond the suggestion of this mode of fashion, it is quite difficult to grasp clearly the relationships of images in the poem as well as our own relationship to the poem. How, for instance, does one put "the whole panoply of the past" in one's hair? If the poem is about the innate indecency of civilization or even more particularly about the inhumane aspects of capitalism ("It's bankruptcy . . . / On the day someone sells an old house / And someone else begins to add on to his"), what is the relationship between the mercenary "We" of the first line in the first stanza and the nostalgic "we" of the first line in the second? And how could a dialect "hear"?

And so Perloff borrows a term from critic Roger Cardinal and calls works like this "enigma texts" (11). She contends that all the possibilities of meaning generated by this kind of poem "give way to . . . an 'irreducible ambiguity'—the creation of labyrinths that have no exit" (34). But while we may read one of Ashbery's shorter poems for the pleasurable "state of expectancy" Perloff describes, such a state may not carry us comfortably through all of his longer poems. Indeed, his recent longer poems bring us much closer to "that disclosure of some special meaning" than do his shorter poems. The key is this: in his later long poems Ashbery writes as if he doubts the plausibility of meaning, absolute or relative, and yet he also remains unconvinced about his own doubt. Furthermore, these poems exhibit both nonreferential and referential styles, but clearly privilege the latter, symbolist method. Again, in the long poems of his current phase he favors a symbolist style with which to write about an indeterminate state of existence. His readers must engage his depiction of reality on the chance that it will provide instances of enlightenment and hope. And while Ashbery can seem like an obsessive agnostic, some of his recent long poems, particularly "A Wave," earn a hard won, if temporary, peace of mind in which the questions are either suspended for a time or answers are tentatively proffered.

Before "Self Portrait" Ashbery's long poems were more enigmatic and more nonreferential than those from "Self-Portrait" on. His long poems have evolved in three distinct phases, moving from the first radically fractured, Cubist, collagist phase to that of the more prosaic, nonreferential phase. This second phase is marked by a newer elegiac tone and a deceptively unexciting

grammar. For all their problems, the poems of this second stage are marvelous attempts at stretching language into a more fruitful zone between utter opacity and conventional symbol.

The first important poem of Ashbery's third and current phase is "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror." In "Self Portrait" Ashbery uses Francesco Parmagianino's strange painting by the same title as an object of meditation. Here, every gesture, every intellectual position holds its own antithetical possibility; every premise is scrutinized by the poet for its likelihood of falsity. The grammar of the long poems of this phase is not always as intentionally self-sabotaging as that of the shorter. It helps the reader to remember that in these Ashbery is considering the ephemerality of experience while also attempting to render the confusion often brought on by that ephemerality. In most of his shorter, more enigmatic poems, readers are usually set randomly adrift at any given point, referentiality having disintegrated in a chaos of pronouns and lost syllogisms. In "A Wave" as in "Self Portrait," readers oscillate between such a void and a more symbolist terrain with clearer landmarks. In the context of his own canon, Ashbery's suggestion that long poems are "much closer to a whole reality" than shorter poems can be read as an admission that, because of their length, long poems should be grounded by referential, determinate writing—or the reader may simply dismiss the poem as so much endless nonsense. In fact, quantitatively there seems to be far more conventionally discursive writing in these poems than secretive writing. The language virtually achieves what Perloff would have to call "the symbolist."

In "A Wave" there exists for the narrator the assumption that there had been an earlier stage in life which was continually fulfilling, when metaphysical anxieties were unnecessary and the spirit was happily replete. But that time of unexamined childlike confidence was abandoned for an adult self-assessment made difficult by a nearly ceaseless skepticism and an equally skeptical approach to that skepticism. The result is the present tentative self-consciousness he describes, a perpetual state of trustlessness. Accordingly, "A Wave" has two subjects: how to comprehend experience when it seems so ephemeral and how to experience love when it, too, is necessarily evanescent, being only a part of the larger experiential realm.

While "A Wave" begins with several difficult passages, the poem grows increasingly philosophical and accessible, though not committing itself to the subject of love until about a quarter of the way through. Here, Ashbery doesn't so much announce his subject, but rather describes it in passing. First, he is discussing a sense of new purpose:

And no special sense of decline ensued
But perhaps a few moments of music of such tact
and weariness
That one awakens with a new sense of purpose. . . . (72)

But, still concerned with this "new sense of purpose," he mentions:

I am prepared to deal with this
While putting together notes related to the question of love
For the many, for two people at once, and for myself
In a time of need unlike those that have arisen so far. (73)

Thus the poem's intention is declared: the poet will simultaneously discuss twin positives in his life—purpose and love. But of both we can only have some vague understanding. For Ashbery, life occurs, and only rarely are we sensitive to the details of our passing through it, each of us alone in our usual dim state:

none
stand with you as you mope and thrash
your way through time,
Imagining it as it is, a kind of tragic euphoria
In which your spirit sprouted. (68–69)

Because we necessarily must live our lives in the dishevelment of shifting feelings rather than the clarity of confident knowing, we receive life as impression. Each moment continually gives way to the next, being assimilated into a vague supposition based on the past. We cannot constantly compute our positions, and thus Ashbery frequently resorts to the most important word in the poem's lexicon: *sense*. We retain a *sense* of life and of ourselves, and very little more.

Sometimes that sense is, indeed, very vague. During such moments, we gain what Ashbery sees as a "sense" of confusion, which he sometimes illustrates with amusing blocks of bewildering logical connections, very much like the shorter poems.

These passages seem to be communicating something about the inevitability of quotidian events. Meaning appears to be real, only hidden or just around the corner.

But again Ashbery does not engage in so indeterminate a style for long, and, just as the quotidian can begin to make some sense at times, his verse becomes increasingly clearer. This is not to say that he believes in belief, so to speak, but that his language resorts once more to dealing with incertitude in a comprehensible manner. Inevitably he shifts back to a more understandable poetic language in order to describe the relationship between attempts at categorizing experience and what that experience will actually come to be. Meaning thus lies not in the "crispness" of rational understanding, but in "a density of . . . opinion" (AW 69–70) which, because it is not and cannot be carefully calculated, must be a feeling, a "sense" formed of suspended conjecture. The poem consists of a continuing series of Kafkaesque reactions and counterreactions.

We had, though, a feeling of security
But we weren't aware of it then: that's
How secure we were. (75)

Ashbery often uses the words "so" and "and" to propel the poem along against the impediments thrown up by "yet" and "but." Back and forth, the potential contests against the disempowering.

Unlike Stevens, Ashbery is rarely conclusively satisfied; unwilling to forego his "questioning side," he suggests a state of existence in which the processes of the poem continue after the poem's finish until our own demise:

And so each of us has to remain alone, conscious of
each other
Until the day when war absolves us of our differences. We'll
Stay in touch. So they have it, all the time. But all was
strange. (89)

Here Ashbery is not only unwilling to forego his circular doubt, but he is also unwilling to finish the poem on purely symbolist terms. "They" is a sudden, inexplicable intrusion, suggesting perhaps "our differences," or former lovers, or more probably the existence of greater random forces which we cannot control.

The quotations above demonstrate that "A Wave" is not a radically fragmented, enigmatic, inaccessible piece of writing. Certainly, many of Ashbery's signature devices appear throughout the poem: the unclear pronoun references, the long sentence fragments, the cleverly misplaced modifiers, the intentional reliance on amorphous, beguiling generalizations. At times, he reverses the process of Eliotic fragmentation by using conventionally logical connectives to link illogically related notions; at other times, he splices nonsensical ideas together by linking them to a single common event. Yet only the opening of the poem is as particularly puzzling as the shorter, purely enigmatic poems. The grammar becomes more conventional and the poem becomes progressively comprehensible as it probes its themes.

Sometime before the publication of "Self-Portrait," Ashbery said that he had been "attempting to keep meaningfulness up to the pace of randomness . . . I really think meaningfulness can't get along without randomness and that they somehow have to be brought together" (*Craft* 121).³ "A Wave" is certainly an attempt to do just that: to grant the poem a symbolist logic while also rendering the sudden moments of confusion and uncertainty we often encounter in the course of a day, let alone the course of a lifetime. Generally his writing is symbolist when he *tells* us and enigmatic when he *shows* us. The lasting effect of this blend is to endow the reader with an impression of a consciousness energized by a desire to question while enervated by a propensity to doubt.

³I first realized the importance of this quote when reading Kalstone 187.

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